



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

Launch of Writers in Conversation 2014

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During this glorious week of sunshine, Adelaide Writers' Week and celebratory festival atmosphere, I'm delighted to have this opportunity to talk to you about the wonderful literary creation that we are launching this evening – *Writers in Conversation* – brainchild of two extraordinary talents working in concert as co-editors, our very own incomparable Dr Gillian Dooley, who wears a number of hats at Flinders University, including one as editor of *Transnational Literature*, and Dr Nick Turner at Edge Hill University in Lancashire.

Just as the Director of Adelaide Writers' Week has spoken in the media this week in very glowing terms about the dedicated and enthusiastic following at that now yearly event, where members of the audience experience a close intellectual engagement with the writer or writers on stage (who in turn share their ideas and personal reflections about themselves and their craft), I like to think of *Writers in Conversation* as a kind of micro or compact Writers' Week. I imagine it soaring through the ether on virtual wings, its winged words (to borrow a phrase from the opening interview) building a loyal following in years to come. I see it encouraging both a local and a world-wide audience to come and go at leisure from the virtual Q & A setting, enjoying the intimacy of an online armchair encounter with a very diverse group of writers who share memories and experiences, literary analysis, personal thoughts and insights about their creative practice. They also share honest reflection about themselves and their peers and precursors, whether humorous, dismissive, inspiring, revealing, enigmatic, politically committed but *always* candid and *always* compelling.

In April last year, the original proposal for *Writers in Conversation* was 'to establish an online open-access literary journal specialising in in-depth, well-researched interviews with writers in all literary genres (including criticism), concentrating on their work, their ideas and related matters, to be published jointly by Flinders University and the University of Central Lancashire.'

How did it come about? Gillian met Nick Turner at an Iris Murdoch conference a few years ago, and they have kept in touch. She tells me that the idea for *Writers in Conversation* came about when Nick, an expert on post-war British women writers, was looking for a suitable publication outlet for interviews he had conducted with Dame Margaret Drabble and Zoë Fairbairns. He asked Gillian for suggestions.

Ladies and gentlemen, anyone who knows Gillian Dooley knows that Gillian is a goldmine of ideas and know how.

Gillian approached a number of us, including the Flinders Institute for Research in the Humanities. FIRtH, to use its acronym (otherwise fondly referred to as 'Colin') was secured as a host and here we are today. An extraordinary achievement in just a little over 12 months! Congratulations, Gillian and Nick!

Well, ladies and gentlemen, *Writers in Conversation* fulfils its proposal brief and so much more. Tonight we celebrate this achievement with the publication of 16 inaugural interviews conducted by an international group of interviewers from Australia, the UK, India and China, who are variously doctoral candidates, editors, established writers, academics, reviewers, poets, translators and even bloggers. The interviewers include co-editor Nick Turner whose incisive and scholarly interviews with Dame Margaret Drabble and Zoë Fairbairns have finally found a home.

Taking a rapid look at the first issue's offerings: I mentioned winged words earlier and the very first interview is David Golding's conversation with Claire Corbett. Golding prefaces the interview with his own reflections on the author's sensitivity to language and he goes on to develop a compelling discussion about genre, language, risk-taking and inspiration.

Of quirky interest is Corbett's negative appraisal of the quick read novel, analogous to fast food/junk food. If Corbett favours the slow food approach with writing, her interviewer also offers more than a mere antipasto. It's a satisfying banquet with the interviewee exclaiming about her craft: 'I wanted you as the reader to feel it or what was the point of writing it at all?'

Margaret Drabble's interview, conducted at her London home, conveys, among a wealth of topics, her sense of the ruthlessness animating the world of major prize giving and big publishing advances on commercial fiction. Through Nick Turner's richly textured questions, which in themselves often read as mini expository pieces, we also learn of Drabble's early influences and her abiding interest in the novel as a portrait of society. At the same time she speaks with unflinching honesty about the difficulty of undertaking large social novels that require dedicated field work and how her future plans will take her in different directions in order to experiment with new ideas and diverse kinds of writing. It is a generous and satisfying interview.

Similarly with Zoë Fairbairns, the reader is absorbed into her deep-seated convictions and compulsions as a writer honing her craft, especially when she exclaims: 'I try to get into the situation that the fictional character was getting into, and pay attention, and get it right.' Or consider this forthright statement: 'Look at one thing with enough intensity, and it will take on a universality that you will rarely achieve if you set out to write about everything.'

There are multiple memorable moments throughout this first issue. For example, I enjoyed Marlon Fick's description of 'the myths that cling to the inner lining of our brains' but was also captivated by his declaration about his need 'to be honest with myself and be true to the stories I had to tell and be true to the reader, too.' Bill Gammage, in his interview, also exclaims: 'My rule is, Tell a story!' but at the conclusion of this unique 'unedited' interview, replete with Australian idiom, the interviewer, Rowena Lennox, reflects at length on her own journey of truly comprehending, as a result of her conversation with Gammage, the far-reaching impact of 1788 and the arrival of the British newcomers among the first people of Australia.

Eligidi Rajkumar's interview with Dalit feminist writer Shyamala Gogu is a sobering and thought-provoking piece that turns its lens on Dalit identity and the seminal role that translation plays in spreading the work of activist-writers, especially those who struggle against discrimination of the order of the Dalit community's plight against the concepts of Untouchability and caste oppression. I highly commend this interview to you.

Much-loved Australian author Marion Halligan offers a fascinating discussion about creative writing technique, for example, the use of metaphor or the capturing of the minutiae of daily life (what she terms the 'small detail in people's lives'), and the choices that they have, especially in their personal relationships. Halligan ends up sharing with the interviewer, Robyn Greaves, some of her own family background and marital stories, along the way granting insights on human desire and the absence of desire in the human condition and what that might mean, particularly when she reflects on the figure of the *clochard*, the homeless person who lives as an outcast in society. As someone who published her first book at 47 years of age, Halligan admits: 'Writing is quite hard, and it's very long term.'

Another Australian writer, Rob Harle, interviewed by Sunil Sharma, is an artist who crosses media and has much to say about current society. He gives the following advice to new poets: 'Fuel the "fire in your belly" and help others see the possibilities of a life worth living. If your poetry is not worth dying for, it's not worth writing and certainly not worth publishing.'

With the marvellous Ruth Starke at the helm, the interview with our brilliant young local writer Hannah Kent traces the fire in the belly that commenced as the creative component of Hannah's PhD at Flinders and has become a conflagration; an international hit and forthcoming Hollywood movie. But the story of Agnes in the phenomenally successful novel *Burial Rites* all began with Hannah's intense yearning to learn more about a real-life figure who was treated as an outcast and condemned to death. If 'Landscape is destiny', as Hannah says when quoting Ron Rash, the Icelandic landscape became Hannah's creative destiny in ways that she could never have imagined as a lonely and isolated Rotary exchange student in Iceland. Another interview that I warmly commend to you.

Autumn Royal's interview with Jane Montgomery Griffiths brings forth the latter's creative practice in interpreting the voices of women in history who have been misunderstood. The exchange focuses on Montgomery Griffith's adaptation for the stage in 2012 of Dorothy Porter's verse novel *Wild Surmise*. The interviewee's fascination with the 'innate theatricality', as she calls it, of Porter's verse novel and the visceral quality of poetic language are beautifully conveyed, as is her reflection on the 'inescapability of Eros'.

Eros is everywhere felt across a number of the interviews, but moving to a darker mood and place, Maya Linden's interview with Susanna Moore offers insights on the 'problematic intersection of fictional identities and social reality' especially as it pertains to writing that explores taboo material and sexual violence. However, in a twist to the conventional interview format, Moore's own words follow the interviewer's concluding remarks, and express the following: 'The role of the writer is to render the world, not alter it!'

Author Gayathri Prabhu attempts to render the world of transgender memoirist A. Revathi through fragments of conversation that occurred across a period of three days at different locations. This piece, translated into English, captures not only the interviewee's thoughts but also her body language, as Prabhu describes in a kind of hushed reverie, the beauty of Revathi's gaze, her hair, and her moments of tension as she prepares to face

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audiences at public events. Prabhu concludes by turning the mirror back on herself in relation to the interviewee and the intersection of ideas: 'There is more I want to tell her, more I want to learn from her,' as indeed the reader might also be desirous of doing.

Poet Sudeep Sen, who is interviewed by Ziaul Karim, observes: 'imaginative spaces occupy a zone of secrecy that is limitless, expansive, and full of mystery. It is a space that allows for creative unfurling of ideas and energies.' This interview has the added brilliance of Sen's poetic voice as well as his reflections of growing up in a multilingual and multicultural space. If *Writers in Conversation* is the banquet, Sen's interview is one of the main courses, so nourishing is the detailed and brilliantly-hued discussion about his imaginative craft and influences.

In the final three interviews, the reader is treated to an absorbing discussion about multiple voices and identities as expressed by Pakistani writer Qaisra Shahraz, who is interviewed by Yasser Arafath. The author speaks frankly about her views on community cohesion and integration.

In the interview of historian Peter Stansky by Darryl Burrowes we have the verbatim transcript of a conversation about George Orwell and his role in Spain during the Spanish Civil War and Stansky's candid reflections about Orwell and other influential figures of his day.

Finally, Canadian author Kathleen Winter, interviewed by James Bailey, talks about her novel *Annabel* which has an intersex protagonist Wayne who is growing up in Labrador (located in Newfoundland in eastern Canada). Annabel is the girl who lives inside Wayne and with whom he keeps a secret connection and communion.

Well there you have it! *Writers in Conversation* – a dynamic and compelling new voice in our literary community. Please read it and savour it – I know I have. Thank you, Gillian, Nick and Craig Taylor, Director of FIRtH, for affording me this very special privilege tonight.

And so it is with immense pleasure and pride that I hereby officially launch *Writers in Conversation*.

Adelaide, 7 March 2014

Speech at launch of *Writers in Conversation*. Diana Glenn.
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http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/writers_in_conversation/